

UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA



# OPTIMISM

BY

REV. PROFESSOR ROBERT LAW

M.A., B.D.

KNOX COLLEGE, TORONTO

*An Address delivered at the Annual Convocation  
of the University, May 10th, 1918*



UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

# OPTIMISM

BY

REV. PROFESSOR ROBERT LAW  
M.A., B.D.  
KNOX COLLEGE, TORONTO

*An Address delivered at the Annual Convocation  
of the University, May 10th, 1918*



## OPTIMISM

---

The subject on which I have thought it appropriate to address you is Optimism; for, though to speak on such a theme in Western Canada may look like carrying coals to Newcastle, the character of the times that are passing over us demands all the optimism it is possible for any of us to possess. In the first sense of the word, optimism is a natural quality, a disposition one is born with or without, as the case may be, a tendency to look on the bright side, to take a favorable view of circumstances and prospects. It is what is otherwise called the sanguine temperament; and this name at once suggests the close interdependence of body and mind in the make-up of our nature. A full tide of clean, healthy blood, circulating vigorously in body and brain and somehow irrigating the roots of thought and feeling, is the physical counterpart of this temperament. And, therefore, it is characteristically the gift of youth. Youth and health can scarcely be other than optimistic. Thank God for it! It is the rich warm blood pulsing in the veins of our young men and women that keeps this otherwise old and withered world young, full of hope and joy; and secures that, as one generation of us is growing grey-haired and conservative, stiffened in our thoughts and ways, another is always rising up with fresh dreams and impulses, filled with a new wine of the spirit. Well that it is so! If life began with "Vanity of vanities" as its watch-word, its current would be frozen at the source; if even with the chastened sagacity of age, it would come near to stagnation.

No matter that much of illusion is mingled with the optimism of youth; illusion has its place in the education of life. No matter that in many an instance Hope tells a flattering tale; whether real or illusory, it is Hope that keeps the world moving. No matter though life never turns out what any of us expects, but something better or worse, at any rate something different; were it not for the expectations we should never live at all. Even the little we accomplish

we should never have accomplished but for the hopes that proved too great for accomplishment. If necessity is the mother of invention, optimism is the father of enterprise. Optimists are the advance-guard of all the great armies, of religion and philanthropy, science and civilization.

Yet this happy, courageous, generous temperament is not without its defects and dangers. There is no temperament, indeed, on which our common speech showers so many disapproving epithets. Blind optimism, we speak of, and shallow optimism, cheap optimism, facile, credulous, unthinking optimism. And each of these epithets is a beacon-light warning the optimist of the rocks and shoals on which he is apt to make shipwreck. The radical vice of the optimist is to *ignore*. He reviews with pride his ten thousand men, but he ignores the enemy's twenty thousand. He does not reckon adequately with the stubborn, intractable nature of the material on which human effort has to spend itself. So the optimist is apt to be fickle and inconstant. He does not relish collar-work, the long pull and the strong pull. He pictures the path of his choice as one to be travelled easily, swiftly and pleasantly; and at the first taste of disappointment, the first hint of a lion in the way, his optimistic imagination flies off to another as promising more of the desired qualities. In business, the victim of this temperament hops from project to project; in other matters, such as education or hygiene, he becomes the devotee of every latest nostrum and fad; in philanthropy, is always pinning his faith to some new specific for washing the Ethiopian white; in religion, to a new doctrine or organization or method which is to revolutionize the Church and the world. In short, the temptation that everywhere besets the optimist is the "short cut"; and soon as he is disillusioned about one he is apt to be fascinated by another. As the virtue of the optimistic temperament is its openness to new ideas, new personalities and movements, so its vice is to be for ever taking up with some new thing, and finding salvation in it because it is new.

All this may seem to suggest that optimism is a quality of doubtful value. But this would be a false inference. The practical value of optimism amounts to a necessity. Without something of it one might almost as well put up the shutters

and close the business of living. Nor is it possible to possess too much of it. There cannot be an excessive optimism. The need is not to temper and dilute it with occasional admixtures of pessimism, but like every natural quality and power it needs to be *educated*. That is the second thing of which I wish to speak—the education of optimism.

Optimism, when it rises above the merely temperamental, becomes a fixed faith in the *optimum*, the best, faith in the best and hope for the best. And if you ask me what education is, I say that, more than anything else, it is the process by which, in any province of human effort, we get an ever growing and deepening conception of the “best” in that province, and of the way to that “best.” And what we call the education of a soul, of human experience as a unity, is the process by which we get an ever expanding and deepening conception of the ideal “best,” the best for the whole empire of life. That education is given—one would rather not say it, but I fear it must be said—is in large measure given through disillusionment. Whether it be due to our fault or to our natural limitation—and no doubt it is due partly to both—the face of truth is unveiled to us by disillusionment. We are driven from the surface into the depths by disillusionment. And so optimism, while never changing its character as faith in the best, must always be changing its ground with our advancing conception of the best. In this, indeed, consists the difference between the optimism that is in process of education and that which remains uneducated. As in the first stages of prairie agriculture men are content to scratch the surface of the soil and scatter the seed and look for a crop, and when this fails some merely betake themselves elsewhere to practise the same naive kind of tillage, while others take to ploughing more deeply, and farming more scientifically where they are; so is it with the false and the true optimism. Some learn nothing by disillusionment. They scratch the surface of life here, then they scratch it there, seeking still the same results by the same methods, their conception of the “best” still the same in its thinness and crudity. Others learn. Their optimism seeks a deeper soil in which to root itself; when the shallower springs run dry, it sinks an artesian well.

It is only thus that optimism can adjust itself to facts, especially to that fact which inevitably has so large a place in human life, the fact of failure. On the material plane, where we are set in conflict with circumstances, or in competition with our fellows for the prizes which constitute what is ordinarily called success, a proportion of failure is a mathematical certainty. Every business, every profession, has its disappointed men—and must have. Not even Canada is wide enough for a universal success of that sort; and if optimism were justified only by such success, it would be a precarious investment indeed, likely to leave on our hands a deal of bankrupt stock. But it is not so. Disillusioned perhaps, but with purged eyesight, optimism wings its flight towards the loftier realms of the Ideal: takes “sanctuary within the holier blue.”

Yet it is here, not in the material arena, but where man is set against the challenge of the ideal, that the experience of failure is most inevitable. Here it is most surely true that, as Stevenson says in his flashing, paradoxical way, “our business in this world is not to succeed, but to continue failing in good spirits.” A hard saying, but a true one. The artist’s portfolio is full of unfinished sketches—failures. The minister’s drawer is full of unfinished sermons—failures. The life-path of the best men and women is strewn with broken purposes, and aspirations never realized—failures. As Browning asks:

“Fail I alone in words and deeds?  
 Why, all men strive, and who succeeds?  
 What hand and brain went ever paired?  
 What heart alike conceived and dared?  
 What act proved all its thought had been?”

Here we are all failures; every man worth his salt, at least, is a failure. I assume that we all believe in an ideal “best,” and that in broad outline we all have the same conception of that “best,” as not material but spiritual, as comprised in the great triad of Truth, Beauty and Goodness. I assume that we all consent to the fine saying of Keats, that the use of the world is to be the “vale of soul-making.” But we hold this truth, not only with various degrees of clearness



and intensity of conviction, we hold it with differences of meaning. Probably no two of us fill in the outline with exactly the same content. Granted that the supreme end is soul-making, what is the ideal soul, and what is the use of the world for its making? Optimism is belief in the "best"; but what is the "best"? We may define it. We may say with Kant that it is the good will; but then what is it that constitutes a *good* will? We may say with the Christian that it is likeness to Christ, a character whose mainspring is love; but who knows the heights and depths and breadths of such a character? The "best" is not only an actually unfulfilled ideal, it is necessarily so. It recedes like the horizon as we approach it; and, if in the mundane sphere of effort, failure is never improbable, here it is inevitable. It is the mark of every true life that it signifies and intends more than it ever succeeds in actually being.

It may seem as if such a view of life is deeply tinged with pessimism; but in truth it is the optimistic, and the only optimistic view. Such a sense of failure comes not from our littleness but from our greatness. It is the sigh of the soul for its unrealized self. Not the publican, the self-confessed failure, but the self-praising Pharisee is the pessimist. Were there a man who should say that, being what he is, he is an ideal human creature—having attained and being already perfect—of all self-valuations his would be the meanest. Such a man would be wallowing in the depths of unconscious pessimism. It is he who says, "I am a failure," and is conscious of it, who in truth rates himself highly. He is the optimist. It is to him that the limitless kingdom of the future opens its gates.

Here, then, is the mark of true optimism. Not only does it survive failure; it is educated by failure; it thrives on failure. A well-known artist has said that no picture is worth anything until it has been spoiled three times. What makes any picture great is gathered from the brink of failure. To gather the flower of victory from the brink of failure—that is the criterion and function of true optimism. There is in it an indestructible resiliency, an innate power of recovery, of revival, of resurrection, from disillusionment and apparent disaster and defeat. It calls men always to a

winning fight, the one winning fight there can be, perhaps for all finite life, certainly for us—the fight of faith.

But if this is its criterion and its function, what is its source? Whence is this invincible faith in the "best," and the hope for it, derived? Optimism is not only a temperament or an attitude toward life; it is a philosophy, a creed. The education of optimism in individual experience is always related to larger movements in the thought and experience of mankind. The history of optimism in the larger sense, the history of man's expanding conception of the "best," and of the risings and fallings and resurrections of his faith and hope in the "best" has yet to be written. It is even now at an acute stage of its making. The tragedy of the war has not killed optimism; but it has given a severe blow to an optimism. It has turned to something like ditchwater the heady drink with which for half a century the modern world has kept its spirits up. That optimism, in its main characteristics, has been evolutionary, materialistic, humanitarian. Its presupposition was a necessary and almost automatic evolution of human affairs in the right direction. The god of our idolatry was progress (spelled with a capital P). What we meant by it—progress toward what—we did not too closely enquire; but in the main we meant an ampler supply and a wider diffusion of the means of material well-being, to be brought about by more scientific exploitation and distribution of nature's wealth. The end in view was not so much to make man a nobler being, possessing in himself more of the sources of satisfaction, as it was to make him a more elaborately comfortable being, possessing and at the same time becoming dependent on a more and more complex apparatus of external aids. And by natural consequence, this optimism centred in Man. Great and marvelous were thy works, oh Man! Had we not one by one wrung nature's secrets from her keeping? Had we not explored the heights of heaven and the ocean's abyss? Had we not built mighty engines, and leviathan ships, and mammoth cities with booming trade, and with mills and factories and universities and hospitals on an always more stupendous scale? We had constituted a wonderful empire of *things*, and called this empire of things civilization, and had enthroned man,

modern man, as its lord and king. Swinburne gave voice to it, when he wrote his *Hymn to Man*:

"Glory to man in the highest, for man is the master of things."

And then came the scathing irony of the War; for ghastly and cruel as it is in every way, it is above all ironical and humiliating. Humanity in the twentieth century has shown itself to be but like children who have laid their hands on gunpowder and edged tools. Our treasure, the accumulation of generations, is blown into the air and sunk in the sea. Our science only adds to the horrors of war the submarine and the aeroplane, the high explosive and the deadly gas. Our political and diplomatic combinations only array against each other, not armies but nations, not nations but empires in arms. Disillusionment with a vengeance! Yes, but through disillusionment lies the way to truth. It is possible to form a really more optimistic judgment of ourselves to-day than half a dozen years ago. We have found that we have "hearts for a cause," that we are "noble yet." We have got a truer scale of values. In the competitions of a rampant commercialism it was made to appear as if the "best" consisted in the qualities that make for successful self-seeking. Our soldiers have taught us again the supremacy of self-sacrifice. We have cast behind us the ideal of the comfortable, and have affirmed that for truth and honour and chivalry every price must be paid, that these are the things for which it is worth while even to die, and without which life is unliveable. There is in the mind and soul of the nation a more exalted vision of the "best."

But with this comes once more the need of a deeper basis for optimism, for faith in the "best." The old question meets us again, as live to-day as when the Book of Job or the tragedies of Aeschylus were written: Does this world, this system of things in which we live and struggle, recognize those values which we affirm to be supreme? Can we have faith that in the nature of things good must ultimately prevail over evil, that in striving for the "best" we have the deep eternal law of the universe behind us? The thought of man to-day is being driven back on that greatest of all issues.

On one side it is said with great force that the optimistic view is groundless, mere auto-suggestion. The one power to overcome the world is the soul's inalienable power of despising and defying it. Faith and hope must go, that alone remains. All that remains for upright men is to go on doing the best with life, even though they know that the struggle is foredoomed to failure. Shall I quote Henley's famous lines?

Out of the night that covers me --  
Dark as the pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods there be  
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud:  
Under the bludgeonings of Chance  
My head is bloody but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the horror of the shades;  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishment the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul.

But is not this a vain boast? Even to be captain of one's soul is not to be master of one's fate, unless to nail the flag to the mast and go down fighting, when one must go down in any event, is to be the master of fate.

Bertrand Russell faces the issue more squarely when in his *Religion of a Free Man* he says: "Henceforth we must learn to build our soul's habitation on the one firm foundation of an unyielding despair." There is no reason, no conscience in the universe but our own; no law but the eternal redistribution of matter and motion. We may be brave, we may die in the last ditch; but there is one winning fight, one only, the fight of death and everlasting nothingness. Neither we, nor our race, nor any value or ideal we have cherished and striven for, can escape the universal doom.

Such is the tragic situation of a high moral consciousness as pitted against a non-moral universe. Tragic indeed, if real. But is it even possible? Certainly nothing could be more unaccountable. Here are we, beings in whom morality, often as we may be disloyal to it, is the deepest and strongest thing, bound by our very nature to fight the good fight; and we are at the same time part and product of a system of things which is soulless and conscienceless, cosmic dust in motion. How does such a universe come to have evolved such beings, to accuse it, to judge, despise and condemn it? Does the sea bring forth the eagle? Or the dry land the fish? Does darkness beget light, or would a soundless universe produce hearing? Does a cotton factory turn out symphonies and poems? To say that a non-moral universe has produced men is to say something still more incredible. Reason will not have it. And the deepest instincts of the human soul will not have it. Men have passed through darker days than these and deeper waters and fierier furnaces, and yet have not lost their faith that in the end all things were upon their side. Nay, it has been in such straits that optimism has risen to its loftiest flights. Never have men been so sure of the everlasting law and kingdom of Righteousness as when falsehood and wrong have been mightiest upon the earth. "For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Yet ours is the winning fight. We are more than conquerors. Inexplicable as it may be, one of the things that cannot be permanently killed out in the human soul is its optimism, its faith in the "best" and hope for the "best."

The War has once more brought this issue to a sharp point in many minds. And the conclusion is forced on us with a new urgency that there is no basis for optimism except in that interpretation of life which we call religious faith—an interpretation which expressly disclaims being an explanation—the conviction that the Power which creates and conducts the world, and has staged the drama of human history thereon, means something by it, something really right and wise and good. If it be said that this is to take refuge in mysticism, I would point out that rational thought has everywhere to take refuge in mysticism. Trust is the key

to life. In the end all our great certainties are rooted and grounded in trust. We take each other on trust. It is the bond by which human society subsists; our loves and friendships live by the mystic sense of trust. We take nature and its laws ultimately on trust. The validity of our perception of all external phenomena is based on trust, on the assurance of what can never be logically demonstrated, that there is a correspondence between external reality and the percipient mind, that they are made the one for the other. And if such a trust is rational, though the matter is incapable of proof, it is no less rational to trust that there is in the universe that which corresponds to our moral intuitions and demands, that the Power that dwells and works at the heart of existence is the same that dwells and works in the yearning for truth, the fidelity to right, the reverence, the aspiration and the love which are the light and strength of our being.

No facile optimism will serve us long; only that which sounds the lowest depths will serve us to the end. The final Best, far beyond our furthest gaze, must have as its crowning glory, the transformed and transfigured worst.

And what is this but the optimism of the Cross? Love suffering, love sacrificing; and by suffering and sacrifice redeeming: love in the Divine itself suffering, sacrificing, redeeming; love in man, yes, and the love there is in nature, suffering, sacrificing, and by suffering and sacrifice redeeming—this is the clue to the unexplored windings of the labyrinth. It is the clue for us all to follow. Faith, Hope, Love, these three abide, and the greatest of these is Love. Love is the "best," and if we follow Love, we shall not be deserted by its fellows, Faith and Hope.



